"Train in difficult, trackless, wooded terrain. War makes extremely heavy demands on the soldier's strengths and nerves. For this reason, make heavy demands on your men in peacetime." — Rommel, 1937.

Kasserine Pass and the Necessity of Training

by Captain James Dunivan

In the armor force of today, "train as you fight" and "tough, realistic training" are two of the most quoted axioms one will hear during the course of any training meeting or quarterly training brief. We, as armor leaders, pride ourselves on our gunnery scores and the field training exercises that culminate with glowing after-action reviews, bragging of fewer vehicles with blinking "whoopee" lights. While these criteria may gain favor with senior raters to justify an above-center-of-mass rating on an officer evaluation report, one must always ask the harder question, "Is my unit trained to survive and succeed on the wartime battlefield?" The wise leader answers this question honestly and uses these scores and AARs to evaluate strengths and weaknesses, then to train and sustain accordingly. The leader who trains only those tasks at which the unit already excels, or simply flips through the manual to fill a weekly training schedule, is leading his unit straight to a disaster.

History is full of such disasters — soldiers sent to an untimely death because of poor training, weak leadership, or an overall lack of readiness. One such disaster unfolded early in 1943 in North Africa, when an American command met the Germans for the first time in battle in World War II. These were not just any Germans, but Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and his *Afrika Korps,* veterans of two years of desert fighting. The result was overwhelming confusion: regiments were overrun and battalions broke and melted away in a mass slaughter of American armor.[1] The Battle of Kasserine Pass, as we have come to call it, was actually a series of operations, from the start at Faid, through Sidi bou Zid and Sbeitla, to the final act at the Kasserine defile.[2]

About 30,000 American soldiers of the U.S. II Corps fought at the Battle of Kasserine Pass, and nearly 6,500 of these men were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner by the Germans. We lost nearly 400 armored vehicles, 200 artillery pieces, and 500 trucks and jeeps, along with large stockpiles of supplies — more than the combined stocks of all the American depots in Algeria and Morocco.[3] These numbers painfully reinforce the certainty that a poorly trained force is a recipe for failure.

Although many factors contributed to failure at Kasserine, training was the shortfall identified by analysts at the time and by historians ever since. As historian Martin Blumenson put it, "Shortcomings shown by American troops in combat in North Africa… were attributed… in large measure to lack of opportunity to train with enough weapons and ammunition."[4]

Another factor was the rush to train thousands of soldiers quickly. The patriotism stirred by Pearl Harbor, combined with the introduction of the draft, swamped the Army's handful of regular officers and noncommissioned officers available for training. And most of these trainers had never seen action themselves, unless it had been in World War I. General Eisenhower realized that this new war would demand hard, trained soldiers, but time was just too short. As a result, American troops were ill-trained, ill-disciplined, and emotionally unprepared for what was soon to come.[5]

After the battle for North Africa was finally won in the summer of 1943, an American ex-journalist and veteran of the campaign, Engineer Captain Ralph Ingersoll, summed up his thoughts about the training of the soldiers who had fought in Africa:

> "It is the practice at home to put troops through rigorous exercises called maneuvers. During these maneuvers soldiers do sleep on the ground and get wet in the rain. But maneuvers are for so many days, for so many weeks, and at the end of them there are nice, warm barracks and the day-rooms and the U.S.O to go back to, and in which to sit around and beef about how tough it all was. This is an odd thing for a soldier who so intensely disliked his own basic training to say, but if I were to pray for a miracle, it just might be that every barracks in the United States would burn down! Then the American Army in training might start learning to live as it will one day have to live, with the sky for a ceiling and the ground for a floor… An army trained that way would be an army that was at home the day it arrived in the field."[6]

The maneuvers Captain Ingersoll referred to included the Louisiana Maneuvers that were "fought" in Louisiana and the Carolinas in 1941. They were the final test of the training and organization of this great army prior to the war.[7]

A year earlier, in July 1940, the entire world had been awed by Germany's armored blitzkriegs through Poland and France. And two weeks after the fall of France, the United States created its own armor force, part of the 1.4 million man army General George C. Marshall had been raising in anticipation that the United States would be drawn into the Second World War. The Louisiana Maneuvers, following earlier division and corps-level maneuvers, meant hard work and misery for America's new soldiers. In Louisiana, they battled mud, dust, bugs, and sudden downpours. In the Carolinas, they found ice in their water buckets in the morning and scrambled to find kerosene heaters.[8]

Elaborate and intricate umpires' rules were in effect for the maneuvers since people could not really be killed, nor shells really fired, or bridges really blown up. Human "casualties" would not drop out; a unit's firepower points would simply be reduced in proportion to them. A "destroyed" tank was deemed "resurrected" and returned to its unit at midnight. The impact area of indirect fire would be marked with flags, and casualties would be assessed against a unit caught in that area.[9] But all things considered, the training was demanding and made to be as realistic as possible.

The maneuvers were quite successful in giving the Army hands-on experience in the mobility of large units, and

in testing current organization and doctrine, for example how tanks should be employed and how combined arms units should be structured. The maneuvers also served their major purpose of testing the quality of essential training — and unfortunately found it lacking. Many small unit commanders failed to show a grasp of basic tactics. Communications, coordination, and reconnaissance had often been poor. Most orders had been slow in preparation and vague or ambiguous.[10] As time would tell, the defeat at Kasserine would again bring these problems to the surface and show the Army what skills troops had to learn and execute. That they quickly became proficient in the warfare of the 1940s confirmed their spirit, flexibility, strong sense of purpose, and will to win.[11]

The point of this comparison is not an attempt to give a history lesson on the Louisiana Maneuvers or the Battle of Kasserine Pass, but rather an attempt to show the historical relationship between training and combat. If this entire course of events seems familiar, perhaps it is because it mirrors in many ways our current method of training. In our armored force today, we have the best soldiers and equipment in the world. We have leadership that understands the importance of training and the need for constant readiness in a volatile world where anything can happen at any given moment. However, just as an infant armor force over fifty years ago trained hard but paid the price for battlefield experience in blood, we once again face a new era in armor as we begin a new century.

We, as armor leaders, cannot look into the future at the cost of removing ourselves from the ground our tracks are rolling over today. We must emphasize training to fight as we would right now, as realistically and safely as possible. Technology is full of wonderful tools that will continue to alter the face of battlefield communication, command, and control. Much is to be gained, but all the digitization in the world cannot replace situational awareness on the ground, troop leading procedures, battle drills, land navigation, and the logistics and maintenance-related training to make it all happen. We cannot move forward at the cost of current readiness.

While our mounted training centers are outstanding, units get only limited opportunities to train there, so armor leaders need to place equal or greater emphasis on tough and demanding home station training. Once again, a focus on the "basics" is essential, and with minimal resources, any commander can exercise his platoons on the forms of contact, actions on contact, formations, movement techniques, transition to maneuver, and actions on the objective. Start in the classroom with a sand table and advance up through the gates of lane training to maximize time and resources when actual maneuver and force-on-force training is available.

Simulations and orders drills are very worthwhile and necessary in saving dollars, but should be utilized as a ramp-up or sustainment tool to improve maneuver training, rather than a substitute for it. The Close Combat Tactical Trainer (CCTT) is an excellent simulation tool that provides realistic training for the entire tank crew. Company commanders and tank platoon leaders can execute maneuver training against an opposing force, working everything from reporting to the most challenging tactical scenarios. All it takes is some prior coordination (experience shows that the CCTT is one of the most underutilized resources on post and can almost always be obtained within six weeks) and a training focus to get some first-class training.

In the realm of tank gunnery, Table XII should be the "main event" instead of everything beginning and ending with Table VIII scores. More importantly, units must plan and execute aggressive live-fire exercises that combine company or larger size elements with integrated indirect fire and engineer assets. Thorough risk management and properly executed gate training allows us to conduct realistic live-fire training at all levels with phenomenal results. Much is to be gained when soldiers and leaders integrate the challenge of command and maneuver with emotion and stimuli that comes from the recoil of the main gun, the blast of the MICLIC, and the impact of HE adjusted on target.

With all the challenges of personnel turnover and shortages, training distracters, limited funds and resources, and time constraints, it is too easy for us armor leaders to shrug our shoulders and hope for things to get better. However, it is imperative that we face these challenges and make use of everything in our power to ensure that our soldiers are trained and ready for war. What one has absolutely no control over is one thing, but if it is in our lane and can be corrected, then we owe it to our soldiers to provide the best training opportunities possible. Officers, especially company commanders and platoon leaders, cannot be afraid to highlight weaknesses during training, or refrain from trying new and innovative ways to train, at the cost of failing in what many consider to be a "zero defects" environment. The ultimate failure, as illustrated at Kasserine, would be the tragedy of allowing history to repeat itself.

Notes

[1]*Kasserine: First Blood*, Charles Whiting, Stein and Day Publishers, New York, N.Y., 1984, p. 10.

[2]*America's First Battles*, Martin Blumenson, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kan., 1986, p. 261.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Blumenson, p. 264.

[5]Whiting, p. 45.

[6]Whiting, p. 46.

[7]"Relax — It's Only a Maneuver," *Military History Quarterly*, Thadeus Holt, p. 30.

[8]Holt, p. 34.

[9]Holt, pp. 33-34.

[10]Holt, pp. 39 and 41.

[11]Blumenson, p. 265.

CPT Jim Dunivan was commissioned as an armor officer from USMA in 1993. He served as a tank platoon leader, tank company XO, and HHC XO in 1-34 AR at Fort Riley, Kan. Additionally, he served as a G3 operations officer in 2ID, Camp Red Cloud, Korea. Returning to the states to Fort Hood, Texas, he was the brigade S1 for the 3d "Grey Wolf" Bde, 1st Cavalry Division and the commander of Bravo Company, 3-8 Cav, 1st CD. He is currently the Assistant TRADOC Systems Manager for FBCB2 at Fort Knox, Ky.